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Medieval Grave Slabs at Skipwith Church

Introduction

Non-effigial stone grave markers are the most common surviving medieval burial monument, and they were also the most long-lived form, being in use from the eleventh to the end of the sixteenth century (Ryder 1991, 1). Although monuments of this class feature a variety of decorative designs, and can even be undecorated, they are frequently referred to as 'cross slabs' because of the decorative motif most commonly associated with them. The decoration can be incised or carved in relief, and the cross heads display a great range of ornamentation, with popular styles varying both chronologically and regionally. The monuments also vary widely in terms of form: they can be upright or recumbent, rectangular or tapering, flat or coped, and range in size from under three feet to over six feet long. They were used to mark burials both inside the church and outside in the churchyard, and could be employed as floor slabs integrated with the internal paving, as coffin or chest lids, or as grave covers or markers set in the ground over uncoffined or wood-coffined interments.

Grave slabs at Skipwith

Several published sources have mentioned the existence of a large number of medieval grave slabs at Skipwith (Allen 1828-31, 141-2; Glynn 1893, 435; Pevsner 1995, 688; Allison 1976, 100), but no systematic survey of the monuments at the church had previously been carried out. A close examination of the church and churchyard produced thirty-nine slabs or slab fragments, of which thirty-seven are located on the south

churchyard wall, reused as coping stones (**Fig 1**). One of the remaining two is a fine Purbeck marble cross slab which lies outside the west wall of the south porch, and the other has been reused as a lintel in the south window of the Saxo-Norman belfry stage of the tower (the third interior stage, which is currently the clock chamber.) All of the monuments except the Purbeck slab appear to be of local limestone. Most of the slabs have been cut down in some way to fit on the churchyard wall, and they are intermixed with other pieces of stone that may well once have been grave slabs, but are now so mutilated that it is impossible to determine their original form. All but five of the identifiable slabs are tapered or coffin-shaped, seven are at least slightly coped, and eleven display some remnant of edge moulding or chamfering.

Unfortunately, of all thirty-nine monuments, only four retain any discernible decoration that aids in determining their date or original appearance. A more in-depth discussion of the four decorated slabs can be found below. It is very likely that the majority of the grave slabs were once sculpted or incised, but continual weathering over many centuries has erased these designs. The church notes of Sir Stephen Glynne from 1825 mention that even then the monuments were ‘dreadfully mutilated,’ but he also notes that ‘there are no fewer than ten, mostly bearing crosses’ (Glynne 1893, 435), suggesting that more designs were visible in the early-nineteenth century than are now. Confirming this unfortunate loss of data is the nearly contemporary survey of Thomas Allen, which recorded that some of the slabs featured ‘crosses flory and remains of inscriptions’ (Allen 1828-31, 142). No inscriptions are now visible.

Most of the grave slabs are now fragmentary, so their original size cannot be determined, but ten of the monuments measure about 170cm in length or more. The majority of the slabs were probably once approximately the size of a five to six-foot-tall adult human. Only one monument, Skipwith 22, appears to be a complete small slab, measuring only 86cm in length. It is often assumed that these miniature slabs commemorated children, but there is no confirmed evidence for this speculation.

The four slabs with remaining decoration are described in detail here. The three of these slabs that are stylistically datable are most likely of thirteenth or fourteenth-century date, which is the peak of grave slab production in Yorkshire (McClain forthcoming).

Skipwith 1 (Fig 2): This slab fragment is highly eroded, featuring only the incised step base of a former cross. It is located in the south window of the third interior stage of the west tower, reused as a lintel. Although this stage of the tower, and indeed the original belfry opening, is of the eleventh/twelfth century, it was altered to a narrow slit window in the fifteenth century, when the upper belfry stage was added to the tower. It was undoubtedly at this time that the cross slab was inserted as the lintel. Late-medieval reuse of grave slabs in architectural fabric is very common (McClain 2005, i, 141; Ryder and Williams 2004, 121), and the majority of it appears to be functional in nature, such as this example, rather than an attempt at display.

While the lack of cross-head decoration on Skipwith 1 prevents precise dating, the reuse provides a *terminus ante quem* of the fifteenth century. Obviously, the slab almost

certainly predates its reuse by at least 100 years. One indication is that the decoration has almost completely disappeared, suggesting that the monument lay exposed in the churchyard for some time prior to being brought inside the protective environment of the church. In other examples of late-medieval slab reuse, it seems that it may have taken at least a century for the commemorative significance of the monument to dissipate to the point where it could be used as a practical piece of masonry. In the 1397 tower staircase at Kirby Ravensworth (North Yorkshire), where over thirty slabs are reused as steps, the latest of the slabs can be stylistically dated to c. 1300 (McClain 2005, ii, 218). In the case of the Skipwith slab, the weathering away of the monument's decorative features may have aided this process of 'forgetting.'

Skipwith 2 (Fig 3): This finely carved slab of Purbeck marble, now in two pieces, is located outside the west end of the south porch. Although it lies on the ground, it is almost certainly not *in situ*. Indeed, the good preservation of the carving may suggest that the slab spent much of its life inside the church. The slab features a low-relief cross bottonnee with expanded center, a slender shaft, and a three-step base, with a double-chamfered moulding around the edge of the slab. The slab bears all the hallmarks of the classic mass-produced designs of the Purbeck workshop, and it can be dated to c. 1300 (Butler 1965, 143-44). Purbeck cross slabs are generally rare in northern England (Pevsner 1995, 688); only one is known from the North Riding (at the Gilbertine Priory of Old Malton) (McClain 2005, ii, 236). The importation of a fine stone from such a distance indicates the high status and expendable wealth of at least one patron of

Skipwith, and may be related to the church's ties to the Bishop of Durham (Allison 1976, 99).

Skipwith 16 (Fig 4): This slab is a highly weathered fragment set on the churchyard wall, the first stone to the east of the churchyard gate. The incised decoration is only just discernible, and will almost certainly be entirely eroded within a few years. The slab features a three-step base and plain shaft, rising to a cross head which has been mostly removed, probably when the slab was cut down either to place on the wall or for another, previous reuse. The portion of the head that is still visible suggests a foliated bracelet derivative type, probably dating to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.

Skipwith 38 (Fig 5): This is the most elaborate and striking slab at Skipwith, primarily due to its steeply coped form and the survival of its fine, high-relief cross and emblems. This sort of coped monument is usually associated with twelfth-century grave slabs (e.g. Middleton Tyas 1, Finghall 4, North Yorkshire), but in Yorkshire the form does persist into the thirteenth century, as seen in examples at Stanwick, East Harlsey, and Kirkleavington. The slab is most comparable in form to Kirkleavington 31 and 32 (McClain 2005, ii, 200), particularly in terms of the large, flat roundel in which the cross head is carved. The stone is sculpted in high relief, and features a bracelet derivative cross head with fleur-de-lis terminals, all within an enclosing circle, which dates the slab to the thirteenth century. The shaft runs along the peak of the coping, with an unusual undulating, almost 'beaded' appearance, rather than the more usual plain, rounded profile. Whether this is the original decorative appearance of the shaft or due primarily to

weathering is difficult to determine. However, the use of an elaborate trefoil base, as opposed to the more usual stepped base, suggests that it was probably deliberate. The slab also features secondary emblems of a sword and shield, carved onto the left and right faces of the slab, respectively. The sword has a thin, pointed blade, a slightly curving handguard, and a lozenge-shaped pommel. The shield is very narrow and elongated, and comes to a sharp point; if it was ever emblazoned with carved or painted heraldic symbols, they are now fully eroded away. The sword emblem is often thought to represent the lordly status of the commemorated person, but may merely indicate masculine gender, as with the emblem of the shears on female burials (Ryder 1991, 63). However, in this case, the presence of the shield in conjunction with the sword makes the attribution of the slab to a member of the knightly elite more certain.

Discussion

Skipwith features far more medieval slabs than is known at any other church in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and the provision is comparable to those churches with the greatest number of monuments in all of Yorkshire (e.g. Stanwick, Kirby Ravensworth, and Kirkleavington, all in the North Riding.) We cannot be sure exactly how atypical Skipwith is within its region and within Yorkshire until a full survey of East and West Riding grave slabs has been carried out. However, distribution patterns in the North Riding show a consistently low monument density in the Vale of York (McClain forthcoming), and the East Riding also seems to have many fewer grave slabs than the rest of the county (Gittos and Gittos 1989; Morris 1906). Within these contexts, the extremely large group of slabs at Skipwith is highly unusual.

One of the reasons that has been cited for the comparatively low provision of monumental sculpture in the East Riding is the lack of good carving stone in much of the region (Senior 2001, 14), and Skipwith does lie on the clay and alluvium that characterizes the area just south of York (Edwards and Trotter 1954, 5; Allison 1976, 91). However, it is also located on the very western edge of the East Riding, not far from the Magnesian Limestone belt and the great quarry of Tadcaster, which served many churches in the area, most notably York Minster. The connection of Skipwith church to the patronage of the Bishop of Durham may have facilitated the acquisition and transportation of good stone to provide material for both building and monuments at the church, and the affiliation with the powerful bishopric may also have made Skipwith an attractive place to be buried and commemorated.

It is impossible to say with certainty when the slabs were cleared from the church or churchyard to be placed on the south wall. They were on the churchyard wall by 1825 (Glynne 1893, 435), so they were obviously collected and reused earlier than Pearson's 1876 restoration (Pevsner 1995, 688) or the contemporary graveyard expansion (Allison 1976, 100). A gallery was built in the church in 1761 and a south porch added in 1821 (Allison 1976, 100), but neither of these are likely to be responsible for a large clearance of grave monuments, and no further eighteenth or very early-nineteenth century restorations are known of at this time. They might have been disturbed and removed due to the late-medieval shortening of the aisles which occurred in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but there seem to be too many slabs for them to have come only from within the

aisles. Although Glynne writes that the slabs ‘probably were once in the church’ (Glynne 1893, 435), it is perhaps more likely that they were cleared from the churchyard when increased space for post-medieval burials and monuments was needed. The great quantity of slabs, the coped profile of several of the monuments, and the heavy weathering on all of them further supports the idea that many of the churchyard wall slabs were external markers. The fact that Glynne notes that the slabs were already greatly eroded by the early-nineteenth century indicates that they had been exposed, either *in situ* or just lying in the churchyard, or on the wall, for quite some time.

The date of the erection of the south churchyard wall is unknown, but the use of brick suggests that it is not earlier than the eighteenth century, and the documentary references suggest that it was there by the early-nineteenth century. It is also probable that a wall on this line existed previously, judging from the remnants of stone courses low in the central sections of the wall (**Fig 6**). Perhaps an eighteenth-century reorganization of the churchyard, which featured a rebuilding of the churchyard wall in brick and removal of the medieval monuments that were within it, resulted in the current location of the majority of Skipwith’s grave slabs. The treatment of Skipwith’s medieval monuments seems to occupy an interesting middle-ground between the usual late-medieval functional reuse, and the nineteenth-century antiquarian tendency to build the monuments into architecture as a means of displaying artefacts of the church’s history. The use of the stones on the churchyard wall suggests an element of practical reuse, in that many of the slabs were cut down without regard to their original form or design, apparently in order to achieve the correct shape for capping the walls. But in leaving some of the largest slabs

intact, particularly the fine, steeply coped thirteenth century slab, and by placing the monuments in a prominent position at the main entrance to the church, there was undoubtedly some intent to display to the public these remnants of the medieval past.

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Fig 1: Medieval grave slabs reused as coping stones on south churchyard wall

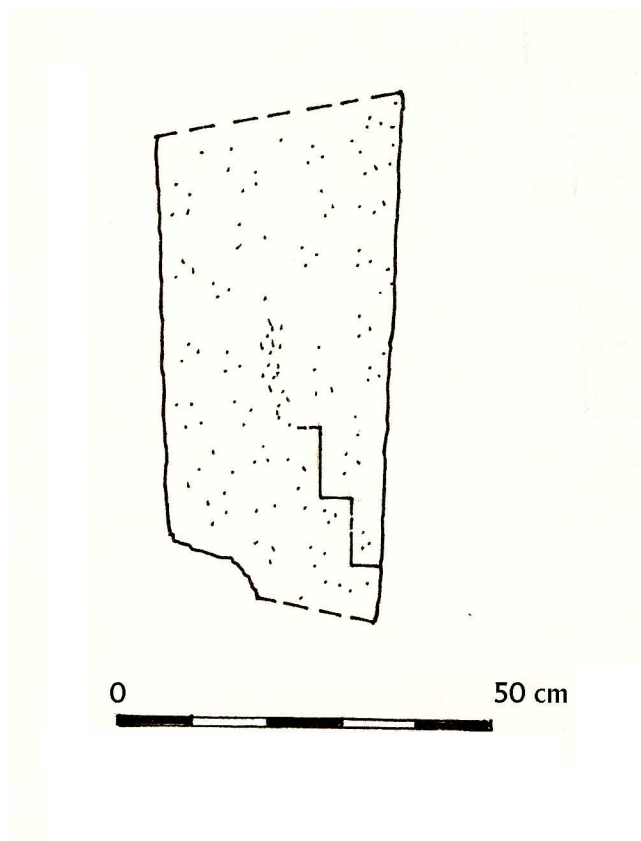


Fig. 2: Skipwith 1: Section of slab reused as the internal lintel of the south window in the third stage of the west tower; pre-fifteenth century

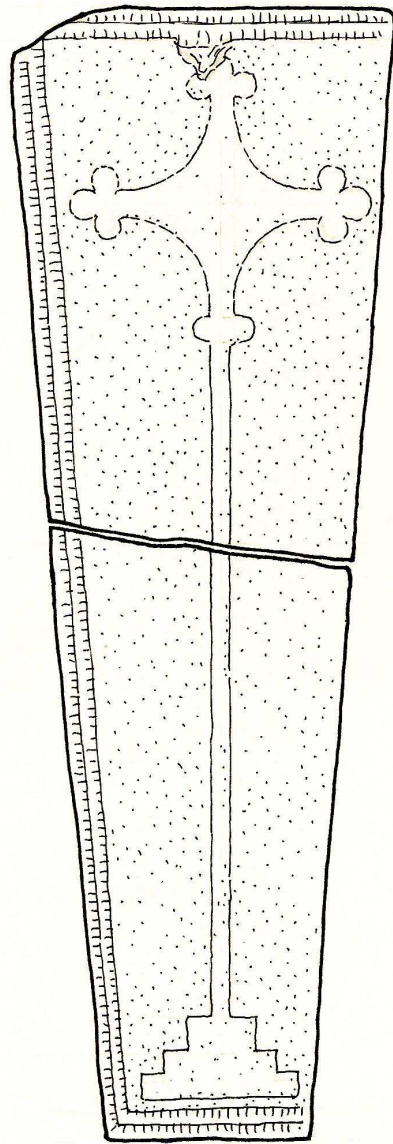


Fig 3: Skipwith 2: Slab of Purbeck marble, lying outside the west wall of the south porch; c. 1300

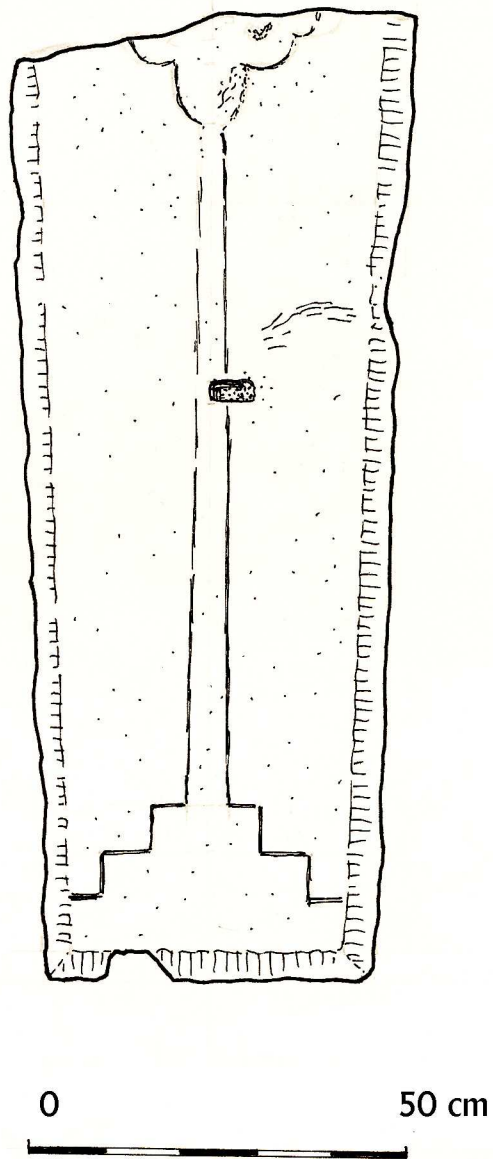


Fig 4: Skipwith 16: Slab fragment of magnesian limestone, reused as the first coping stone to the east of the gate on the south churchyard wall; thirteenth/fourteenth century

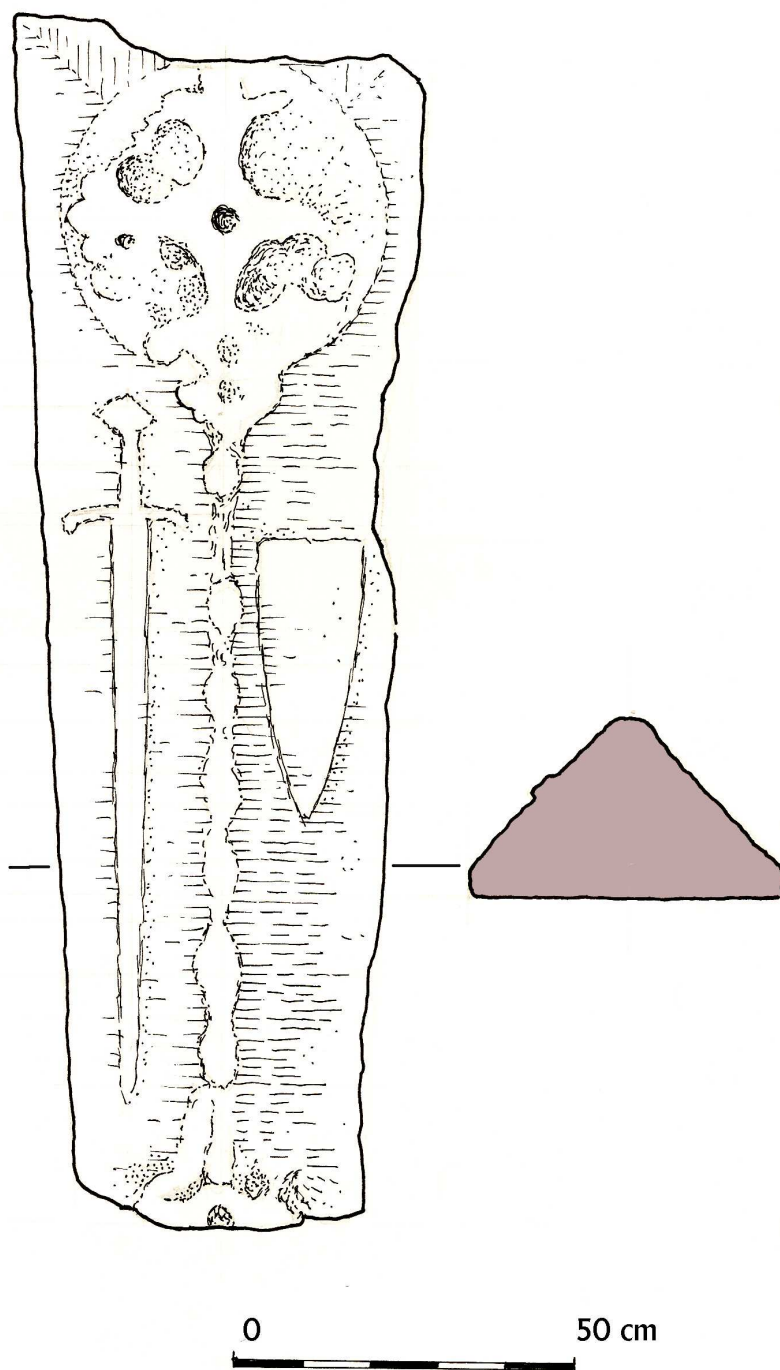


Fig 5: Skipwith 38: Fine, steeply coped slab, reused as the fortieth stone east of the gate on the south churchyard wall; thirteenth century



Fig 6: Lower courses of stone in south churchyard wall